

Sex, Sexuality and Sexiness

Disclaimer: This paper includes obscenities, such as the F-word and C-word as well as sexual themes.

In both scholarly and journalistic literature, heavy metal is still, on the whole, believed to be a masculine genre: music composed by, written about and listened to by men. As an avid metal fan, musician and academic this concept has forever puzzled me. I am a woman and I often identify with traits commonly associated with femininity. How then can I find musical pleasure in something that supposedly isn't for me? And I'm not alone. The Woman fan, musician and industry professional are on the rise in heavy metal culture. It has been noted that women fans make up a third of the global heavy metal fan base (Purcell 2003), and there is reason to believe that this number is gradually increasing. Thus this reading of metal as masculine is not only exclusionary of women but simply inaccurate.

In the paper I will be presenting to you today I aim to rectify this masculinity myth by demonstrating through the experience of musical pleasure of a group of Women Doom Metal fans how women interact with metal music and culture and create at very least a duality in the understanding of metal.

What is Doom metal?

This paper focuses solely on doom metal, a sub-genre of extreme metal. Extreme metal, as its name suggests, is comprised of all the most extreme genres of heavy metal which include: Death, Black, Thrash Grindcore and DOOM. These genres emerged at different times during

the eighties and nineties with even further fragmentation into subgenres such as melodic death metal, post-black metal and in relation to doom, sub genres such as drone, sludge and funeral doom.

Since the inception of extreme metal, it has been a site of curiosity for many metal scholars, with it's problematic politics, its musical diversity and intensity and its global influence and success. An essential work is Keith Kahn-Harris's book 'Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge' (2007), which acts as not a history of extreme metal but a study which seeks specifically to challenge and provide differing and new perspectives on the politics of extreme metal.

This paper focuses specifically on the subgenre of extreme metal: doom metal. Doom's musical qualities can be described in terms of extremely slow tempo, long or epic song structures as well as melancholic and occult lyrics (Kahn-Harris 2007) or more simply in colloquial terms as 'low, slow and loud'¹. The reason for the concentration on doom metal was initially coincidence, as I happened to know a group of women fans who would be perfect for a case study; however, with further research I came to the conclusion that there is a surprising and overwhelming presence of women in the subgenre, and so it became the centre of my research.

Who are the Women of Doom?

The Women of Doom is an informal social collective of women metal fans that spawned out of the local doom scene in Birmingham, England. The friendship group materialised through 'the love of the riff' in a scene that ignores and arguably excludes women from it. This paper is informed by the experiences of six participants who identify both as women, doom fans and as

members of the Women of Doom. Each of these women took part in (face to face) semi-structured interviews, each lasting on average an hour, with several follow up discussions most of which actually initiated by the participants themselves. Each of the Women chose a preferred nickname to be referred to throughout the paper and so are known as the following: Em, Vic, Soph, Emily, Ropa and Zee. The majority of these women are from the Birmingham area, with one participant residing just outside of the city but still remaining in the Midlands and another further up North in Manchester. The majority of the women interviewed identified as White British, with one participant identifying as 'Brown' British/Bengali and another as Black British/Zimbabwean. The women range from twenty-three to forty-two years old and have diverse temporal involvement in the group, including the two women who initiated the search for like minded women.

Over approximately ten years the friendship group gradually increased from a small few in Birmingham to a large membership spread across the UK from Manchester to Wales, Stoke and London. With the ever growing number of passionate women doom fans came the name for the friendship group 'The Women of Doom' taken from a song of the same title from the album *Ride the Snake* by UK band Groan.

Why is women's experience of music important?

Heavy metal music is most often perceived as phallocentric, aggressively masculine music whose fans rely on concepts of 'male-bonding' and modes of performative masculinity, such as the mosh pit, to experience and enjoy the music. This reading of heavy metal fan culture perceives women fans as 'masculine' women who adopt the supposed masculine traits of heavy metal culture and relate to the 'masculinity' of heavy metal music (Krenske and McKay 2000; Nordström and Herz 2013). However, this essentialist approach to audience reception and fan

culture ignores the variety of ways that women (and men) enjoy metal music. Musical experience is versatile: musical emotion and lyrical content interpreted differently and personally by each individual.

Interpretation of music and how it influences musical experience alludes to the writings of Stuart Hall (1973) on audience reception theory. While Hall's model of 'encoding and decoding' refers specifically to media reception, the premise of the variety of ways an audience can 'decode' a text is relevant here. With music as the 'text' the artist acts as the encoder, putting specific emotions, meanings and intentions into the music. The fans or audience then act as the decoder, constructing their own interpretation of the music. Hall argues that there are several interpretations for a text but suggests that overall all texts remain 'open' or polysemic to some degree. This concept is useful when understanding the reception of music and how fan's experience can differ drastically. The understanding of audience reception theory can help to show how the reading of heavy metal as masculine music that evokes aggressive masculine reaction is only one interpretation which essentially closes the text instead of leaving it 'open' for further interpretation.

It is this attitude that is explicitly challenged in this paper. The singular reading of heavy metal music and culture by academics and journalists further excludes and devalues the experience of women, and so my research aims to present and analyse the varying experiences of women through the ethnographic narratives of the Women of Doom. For the purpose of timing, I will be focusing today on what I believe to be the most interesting and important theme that arose when analysing the experience of these women: that of realising musical pleasure through sexuality.

The exploration of musical pleasure is often left out of studies of women heavy metal and rock fans, instead focussing on the problems of access, misogyny and sexual harassment that women face. An example of this is Kahn-Harris (2007) discussion of death and black metal women fans in his book on extreme metal subculture. Kahn-Harris focuses on the marginality of

the women in the scene instead of analysing their experience. As Hill (2016) suggests in her research on the experience of women hard rock and heavy metal fans, excluding discussions of musical pleasure and focusing solely on the obstacles women face does an injustice to the women fans of this music (2016: 106). Thus, I argue, that it is not only important to study women's experience of music, but also to document their understandings of musical pleasure.

Therefore, in this section, in contrary to the phallocentric reading of heavy metal, I tackle questions on women's reception of doom music including, how else can the music be experienced? How do women fans (as opposed to male fans and critics) experience the music? And specifically aimed at the individual experience of the Women of Doom participants I ask how does the influence of feminism affect the experience of women fans?

This paper includes more lengthy participant quotes as the main premise is to present individuality and allow women's voices to be heard.

Sex Sexuality and Sexiness.

Reference to sexual organs, such as the uterus or vagina, sexuality and womanhood, through menstruation and orgasm, and 'sexiness', in the form of seduction and sexual acts, all appeared in discussions with the individual members of the Women of Doom interviewed. Sexual topics arose when asked about either personal experience of doom metal music, or when asked if they believe there is any sexual element to doom. This section will discuss the responses that alluded to sex, sexuality or sexiness in relation to feminism, empowerment and gender.

Several participants mentioned either the pelvis, uterus or vagina when explaining their personal experience of listening to doom music. Similarly to the internal physical responses often

connected to heavy music, such as vibrating organs, the uterus and vagina were described as internal organs which were felt during musical experience. Comparable to Emily's experience of her organs vibrating, Ropa claims that 'when you're at a gig and you can feel the bass rumbling in your uterus...' Ropa connects this 'rumbling' she feels in her uterus at live shows to a sexual element in doom music specifically, something that I will return to later on.

A physical response to doom music mentioned several times by participants was the concept of 'air fucking' apparently coined by Women of Doom member Vic. 'Air fucking' refers to the rocking motion of the pelvis as a physical response to music; the slow 'grooviness' of the doom riff allowing the pelvis to move slowly and freely thus imitating the pelvic thrusts of sexual intercourse. Em recognises her own practice of 'air fucking' where she says:

'If I'm standing up I will air fuck, it [doom] does make me want to air fuck, you know, I feel it in my neck and I feel it in my pelvis and when they both start going independently I don't care what shapes I'm throwing, I'm not even aware what shapes I'm throwing, but I know I'm feeling it' - Em.

Intriguingly, there were also several references to sexuality and womanhood in the responses: two anecdotes of experiencing sexual pleasure, and one concerning menstruation. The first quote comes from Em who explains her intense experience of live doom metal connecting the intensity and 'vibrations' of the music directly to her sexual organs:

'I have had occasions where I'm watching a band and I've felt like 'oh god I could actually have an orgasm here!' I've also had occasions where, I swear to god I've been watching a band and they've riffed the period out of me or they've made me ovulate from the vibrations. And I swear to god that's a thing. I'm pretty sure you

can ask Vic and she'll say exactly the same thing: 'they doomed the period out of me! It was amazing!'

- Em.

In a similar experience Vic recalls feeling sexual pleasure from listening to music at a live show:

'...and I was leaning on there [on the side with the benches] and there was literally like us and two other people in the room. But because I was so hungover I couldn't stand up, and I was like leaning and I remember thinking 'fucking hell I can feel the bass vibrations in my cunt!' not just like an expression like it's entering through my cunt, it's like fucking entering through my cunt. And I was leaning like 'god this feels really good! This is like totally an experience!' - Vic.

It is important to note here that the use of the word 'cunt' was extensive across the majority of the group interviewed. It was very clear from the particular application of this word, not as a swear word but in place of the word vagina, that these Women felt a particular empowerment in using the word and claiming it as their own.

It is clear through the use of sexual language to describe musical experience that these women are connecting their sexuality with the music and affording a form of sexual empowerment. These women are becoming empowered through their sexuality by exploring and understanding their bodies. This occurs in one of two ways: either using sexual expressions to portray their intense passion and musical experience; or by becoming attuned with their body and allowing the vibrations of live music to penetrate their bodies, concentrating on their sexual organs specifically.

The sexual responses of these women are, in terms of existing academic and journalistic literature, rather unique. Women's sexuality is exclusively documented in reference to the groupie stereotype, such as the hysterical fans of The Beatles and Elvis, or in relation to women fan's reaction to sexual lyrics, such as fans of cock rock. Susan Fast (1999) in her research on female Led Zeppelin fans documents women's experience of sexual pleasure through both the sexual lyrics, moaning vocals (of Robert Plant) and physical sexualised image of the band members. In her research, Fast's aim is to challenge the existing model of the 'real' or 'authentic' fan as being only interested in the music, presenting the experiences of 'real' Zeppelin women fans who enjoy sexual or erotic feelings also. This study is an example of female sexual empowerment specifically through role reversal of the male gaze.

Similarly, Frith and McRobbie's (1991) study of rock and sexuality problematically alludes to female empowerment achieved in the genre of cock rock either through gazing upon the 'objectified' male musician or through lyrics which imply female sexual aggression (1991: 382).

Sexual empowerment and the groupie is not only discussed in academic literature but also in autobiographical literature such as the writings from Pamela Des Barres, rock's most famous groupie, and Roxana Shirazi, both women claiming empowerment through exploring their sexuality and positioning themselves as sexually liberated feminists (Hill 2016: 84). While these differing experiences and theorisations of women's sexual empowerment can be problematic in places, I do not wish to discredit them. Instead, I argue that there is another, and to my knowledge, undocumented experience: that of women affording empowerment through their sexuality at the hand of purely music alone.

It would be unproductive to assume this is a product of doom metal music exclusively, however there is clearly some sort of sexual element to doom, which is evidenced by the discussions I had with the varying members of the Women of Doom on the topic. All of the

participants agreed that there was indeed some sort of sensual or sexual element to doom metal music with others going into more depth as to why they believed so.

'Oh yeah, there are some riffs that are like 'Argh! This is baby making music!'. Like, yeah definitely, the rhythm and everything, like there are songs where I just make sexual comments because I can't think of anything else to describe them as...' - Ropa.

Ropa clearly connects sex and sexuality with doom, stating that she actually makes sexual comments when listening to music as a way of sharing her experience of musical pleasure. She continues:

'...There's one Melvin's song 'Going Blind', it's a Kiss cover, and it's just really really...the way it sounds I'm just like, it makes me move really liquid and I just thought to myself: 'if I had to do a strip tease it would be to this'...' - Ropa.

Ropa connects doom music clearly to parts of her sexuality, where she feels that she could dance in a sexual manner to the music, and even take part in the sexual act of a 'strip tease' for a partner. Soph feels similarly about doom, when asked the same question (whether she believes there is a sexual element to doom metal) she declares:

'Big time! I've never thought about it before but there's definitely...when I first started Alunah I said that I wanted to make music that people could fuck to, because for me you listen to some songs and you're like 'that is a total sex song'...but doom is like perfect because it's slow, it's heavy, it's deep. It's just

pure sex...I think a lot of relationships are forged at doom gigs [laughs], especially when there's alcohol involved!' - Soph.

Soph uses the words 'slow', 'heavy' and 'deep' to describe to me how doom music sounds and how that can be connected to sex. Also, Soph brings in another element, that of her experience as a doom metal musician, where she explains that when she writes music she has the aim of making music that will arouse people and make them want to have sex.

The sexual language used by the interviewee's to describe doom metal is incredibly different to the masculine-centric and scene specific language associated with the genre and it's mother genre: extreme metal. When describing musical pleasure, the members of the Women of Doom used words that were either sexual: 'seductive', 'airfucking'; or gender related: 'uterus', 'cunt', 'ovulate'. The use of this atypical language in place of the more aggressive (and so 'masculine') metal dialect is exemplary of how short-sighted it is to assume that metal music and culture is and can only be perceived in one way: masculine.

Conclusion

Exploring the musical pleasure of women fans is such an important study as it affords women agency and in the words of Gabrielle Riches (2011) demonstrates 'the ways in which we can explain why women, appearing to consent to dominant and patriarchal practices and expectations engage in contradictory activities within forms of popular culture' (2011: 327).

The language used by the interviewed members of the Women of Doom to describe experiences of musical pleasure was, in fact, contradictory to the language typically associated with the 'masculine' music. Additionally, Kahn-Harris (2007) notes in his study of extreme metal fans, that when describing their love of the music, the fans would often use scene-specific

language itself (for example words such as 'brutal' and 'heavy'). While these words did slip into descriptions of the music now and then, on the whole, the majority of language used to express musical pleasure was either gender less or specific to this paper I've presented today: sexual: for example 'orgasm', 'seductive'; gender-coded female: 'uterus', 'cunt'.

Remarkably almost all of the language used to describe doom metal music was the antithesis of masculine coded words. As Hill (2016) notes, this use of non-masculine words to describe a supposedly masculine genre brings attention to the fact that gender, and the qualities ascribed to it, is socially constructed. Thus, when metal is described as masculine, 'this is the result of constructed understandings of gender, not the cardinal qualities of the music' (Hill 2016: 130).

The final question is, what inspired these women to use such language and in doing so achieve sexual empowerment in specific cases? I argue that, the pervasive influence of feminism in modern culture has enabled the group to accept and enjoy their sexuality, so becoming sexually free and comfortable with both their bodies and the way they express musical pleasure. As a result of feminist influence and musical passion, I believe these women find not only sexual freedom but also a more general sense of empowerment, something that can be seen in all aspects of the group from their strong bonds of friendship, to the way they experience music as well as the language they use to express themselves.